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ABSTRACT

Moral contradictions and cross-purposes in society make formal moral training in the schools difficult. A discussion is presented of the pressure on the schools to provide values education at a time when society itself is unclear about values. The examples provided by parents, television, and other influences in the lives of young people are frequently contrary to the high standards society appears to hold in esteem. The school carries a large responsibility for instilling ethical values in students since they spend a great deal of time in school and in association with peers and teachers. Examples are given of ways teachers can focus on ethical and moral questions and dilemmas as they teach mathematics, science, English, history, social studies, and the arts. In a discussion of teacher and community responsibility for ethical guidance of the young, vignettes are presented on ways in which drug problems, hostility and violence, and student alienation have been handled in three different schools and communities. (JD)

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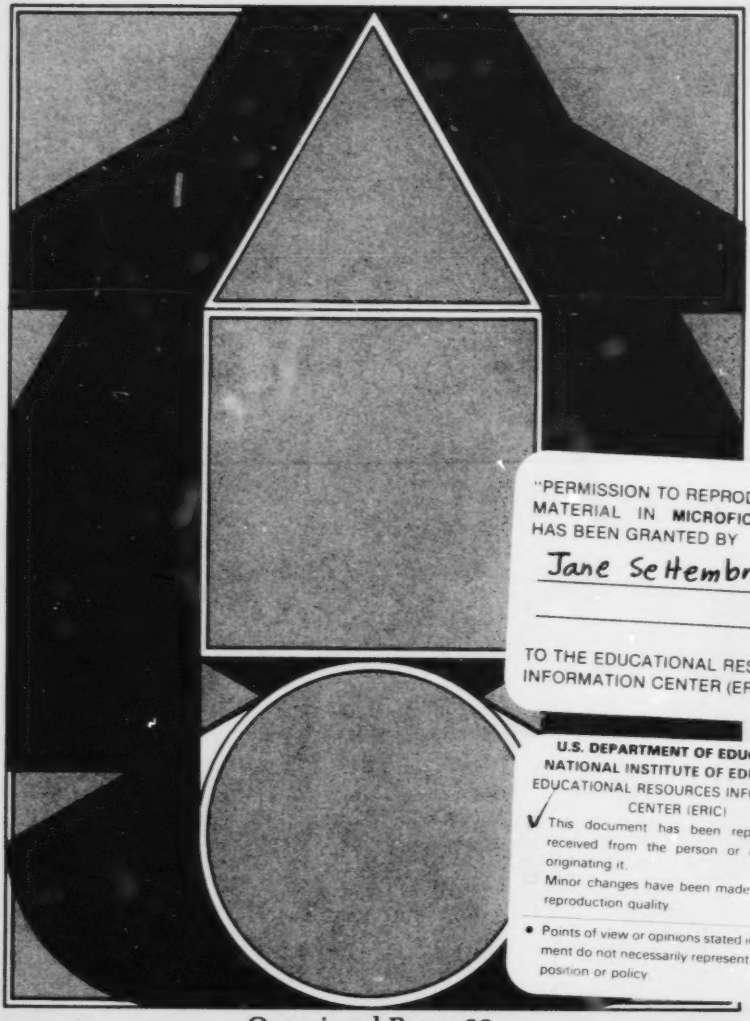
Morality and the Schools

Robert S. Wicks



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Morality and the Schools

By
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FOREWORD

Americans commonly associate values they hold dear with school. In school, children pledge allegiance to the flag every day, learn the history of their country, celebrate its heroes and achievements. Moreover, most young people spend a substantial part of their childhood and adolescence in school, and the instruction they receive there, the treatment they experience, and the company they keep directly affect the development of their moral sensibilities. When the morality of so many young people is as troublesome or alarming as it appears today, there is bound to be pressure on the schools to *do* something.

Yet *doing* something is not a simple assignment. Morality is a controversial and elusive matter. American society is made up of groups and subgroups whose values and standards of morality are by no means the same. In the United States, the close relationship of morality and religion has constitutional implications that make sticky legal issues, not to say bitter political issues. Sometimes, moreover, sincere efforts to perform education's function of cultural transmission are better suited to adjusting students to the needs of institutions than to adjusting institutions to the needs of society. Although many teachers and administrators acknowledge the responsibility of the schools, doing something about the morality of the young is not so easy.

In this occasional paper, Robert Wicks argues that moral contradictions and cross-purposes in society make formal moral training in the schools difficult in the extreme, if not impossible. Like the Council for Basic Education, he questions the merit of "values clarification" and school-wide programs of "moral education." He contends, nevertheless, that effective moral education is "implicit in teaching the subjects that comprise good basic education, when those subjects are taught competently, with courage and imagination." He is especially concerned about the traditional American values of a free and humane society, and he points to the moral imperative of bringing young people and adults back together in cooperative association outside the classroom.

Educated at Princeton University and Union Seminary, Robert S. Wicks has been a widely respected and popular schoolteacher for 30 years. As a housemaster at Newton South High School in Newton, Massachusetts, he is now the administrative head of one division of that school. He is author of *The Edge of Wisdom* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964).

James Howard, Editor

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I. Something Has Gone Radically Awry

Writing in the first *Newsweek* of the 1980's, William Bennett, director of the National Humanities Center, begins an article entitled "Simple Truths" with a quotation from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes: "At this time we need education in the obvious more than investigation of the obscure." Bennett then goes on to offer a modest list of simple truths, not as a way of avoiding serious thought but rather "as handles for the mind to grasp in a world in which everything is called confusing, and many things are." These truths should be used, he contends, to encourage people "to start thinking about the many things that are truly difficult."[1]

One of Bennett's simple truths provides a useful point of departure for our consideration of the role of public schools in the moral development and education of the young.

> Civilization's values are learned. Children are not born with an instinct for democracy or citizenship. Civility, probity, a disinterested concern for the well being of others are not part of the natural order. Efforts must be made by each generation of adults, for each generation of children, to bring them to an understanding of a spiritual inheritance that is their birthright but that doesn't come with birth. Free, responsible, thoughtful people do not emerge naturally or by accident. Rather, such people are the result of the intentions and efforts of parents, teachers, communities, and society at large. This requires that at all times we consciously nurture and support those institutions, practices, and traditions that move civilization along and provide new participants in it.

Families and Children in Trouble

Bennett's assertion is especially relevant because it emphasizes the way a healthy society must strive collectively to secure its future by seeing that its youth have the skills to live a good life, together with an understanding of the accumulated wisdom of the fathers as to what constitutes a good life. In this country, there has always been the notion that with hard work and a little luck parents can give their sons and daughters a better and more abundant life than they had themselves. This has been a familiar response to the commonly held imperative to leave the world a better place than one found it. For the majority, life has seemed to have the optimism and homely moral order that characterized Norman Rockwell's covers for the *Saturday Evening Post*. In that world, grandmothers said grace in the local luncheonette, friendly cops held up traffic for parades of baby ducks, pig-tailed girls brought apples to teachers, and freckled-faced boys played hookey to go fishing. It was a good humored world whose citizens were honest, simple, working

people devoted to family, country, and God. Perhaps the notion is a bit of Waspish nostalgia, but probably even the outsiders in our midst held to such a vision even though they were excluded from the life it described. In relation to other societies, ours appeared to be far and away the most open and amenable to change.

For many today that conception of the good life still prevails, even though for some time it has been accompanied by growing disquiet and the uneasy sense that something has gone radically awry. Increasingly, young people seem to be a threat to their elders' way of life rather than the fulfillment of it. Since World War II there has been an escalation of overt and sometimes violent conflict between generations, fraught with suspicion, contempt, and deep mistrust. At the beginning of the last decade general uneasiness about what was happening to young people led to the White House Conference on Children. The several reports to the President proclaim and document a depressing and dangerous contraction of the process Bennett describes:

> America's families and their children are in trouble, trouble so deep and pervasive as to threaten the future of our nation. The source of the trouble is nothing less than the national neglect of children and those primarily engaged in their care — America's parents.[2]

The reports call to mind many obvious and simple truths that society has forgotten or set aside. One of them is that the schools, as they have developed, separate children both from their families and from the life of the community around them. Even when children are at home, patterns of work and the ever-present TV limit their association with parents.

> Children need people in order to become human . . . the young cannot pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. It is primarily through observing, playing and working with others older and younger than himself that a child discovers both what he can do and who he can become. It is primarily through exposure and interaction with adults and children of different ages that a child acquires new interests and skills and learns the meaning of tolerance, cooperation and compassion. . . . By isolating our children from the rest of society, we abandon them to a world devoid of adults and ruled by the destructive impulses and compelling pressures both of the age-segregated peer groups and the aggressive and explosive [TV] screen.[3]

In his novel *Lord of the Flies*, William Golding presents an account of the dehumanizing consequences to children separated from the adult world as castaways on an island. Initially, the older boys seek to organize the group for survival using the partially internalized lessons of civilized behavior, but it soon becomes evident that they lack the maturity or experience to lead others. For the younger majority, "Whirl is

King"; they quickly succumb to their barbarous impulses and, swept into an intoxication of cruelty, murder the one member of the group who had some sense of the requirements of a viable community.

Pressing the implications of Golding's metaphor onto the schools, one may find what Bennett calls a "handle for the mind to grasp." Granted, the analogy is imprecise; nevertheless, anyone who has worked in schools knows that boys and girls do things collectively they would seldom consider doing individually. The bullying, the fights, the rip-offs and vandalism, the teacher-baiting and rowdyism are more often sparked by peer rumor mills, pressures, and group chemistry than by individual choice. Sometimes the young surrender to an almost irresistible impulse to express the feelings of anger, hatred, jealousy, or revenge — to be beside themselves and enjoy signals of approval from the crowd that assembles for such occasions. The familiar T-shirt bearing the legend "The Devil made me do it" conveys the sort of casual, almost light-hearted engagement with the demonic that seems to taunt adults who want students to take responsibility for their own behavior.

Permissiveness on the part of schools or parents is often cited as the cause of such behavior, and the remedy most consistently proposed is a get-tough policy. The cry goes up for curfews and grounding at home; for detention, a closed campus, and suspensions at school. No one can argue that it does not sometimes help to give school programs clear structure and enforce rules consistently; but generally such strategies are palliatives at best, political face-saving at worst. They tend to obscure the deeper malaise addressed by the White House Conference and deflect attention and energy away from substantive change.

Nevertheless, many men and women are not only concerned about what is happening in schools, but deeply committed to their improvement. Because they care about the future, they are paying closer attention to what young people are learning in order to manage the complicated world they are entering. Because school, by law, takes so much of the most malleable years of childrens' lives, and because social pressures and career-credentialing requirements keep them there for a dozen years, people naturally look to the schools to be the primary agents for influencing the development of young people; and naturally they are putting great pressure on the schools to do something to improve the moral conduct of young people now, and teach them how to make coherent value choices.

Pressure on the Schools: "Values Education"

Those who look to the schools believe that young people are not being adequately prepared to make the moral choices they face in the modern world. They cite the breakdown of the old consensus on the nature of the good life, the pluralism of contemporary society, the deep divisions engendered by the Vietnam war, Watergate, the civil rights movement, the energy crisis, and the threat of nuclear holocaust as a

context that offers only a confusion of values while at the same time it fosters cynical mistrust of those in positions of authority. And they point to young people confused by competing value systems in a world devoid of moral consensus.

Although "values education" proponents have different ideas as to what should be done, they agree that whatever it is, it should be done in the schools. One group wants to cut through all the relativity, pluralistic variety, and situation ethics and re-establish the cultivation of morality and patriotism as a logical and necessary task for schools. An example of this approach is a program begun in 1974 in the Salt Lake City public schools. In a paper entitled *Education and Moral Conduct: Re-Discovering America*, Superintendent of Schools M. Donald Thomas and District Director of Federal Programs Rafael Lewy describe the Salt Lake City plan to lead students beyond mere discussion of moral behavior to "virtuous acts."[4]

On the basis of a statement of moral principles developed for students and a code of ethics to which the faculty made a commitment, the Salt Lake City planners sought to reshape the curriculum in ways to support those principles in day-to-day academic work. In addition, they made a sustained effort to design school activities that would encourage the practice of moral conduct. Their ultimate aim was "not to have a 'program' but to insure that education for moral conduct pervades our entire curriculum. Each of the disciplines deals with a part of human experience which bears on moral behavior. Morality is a way of life, a whole, which cannot be subdivided. Thus the intellectual and emotional channels through which moral decisions are made must also reflect a whole."

Recognition that morality is not something taught by prescription, but rather something caught like a contagion from the committed lives of others, is an important aspect of the Salt Lake City endeavor. Moreover, the ideas that morality is grounded somewhere, and that a culture conveys that grounding in its traditions, its history, its literature, and its art, should remind those who work in schools that to teach morality they do not need to invent new courses and develop more instructional materials, but only to teach the curriculum already in place with greater sensitivity and imagination.

Thomas and Lewy acknowledge that they have not found a totally satisfactory strategy, and they point out the inherent difficulty of evaluating what they have tried to do. Of particular interest is their frank admission that in the high schools their efforts have met with frustration. Although many teachers were engaged in the planned activities, student commitment has been less than satisfactory. Some faculty members explain that students are highly individualistic and "inherently antipathetic to community-oriented and group activities" — which, if true, means that the goals of the program were ill conceived,

according to Thomas and Lewy. Others argue that because adolescents wear gang jackets and join in rock concerts and other activities, "the segmented nature of many high school programs inhibits intimate youth-adult engagement, and makes it harder for us to design vital collective activities that are appropriate to the broadening capabilities of the students."

The matter of youth-adult relationships will be pursued later in this paper, but here it is worth noting that high school is not only the time when girls and boys begin reflecting upon and conceptualizing the situation they are in, but also — and more important — the time when their attitudes and behavior reveal most dramatically the consequences of their exposure to the significant adults in their lives. It will be interesting to see what happens in Salt Lake City when those now in elementary school reach high school after their early experience with this self-conscious and coherent "way of life." It will be especially interesting to see if the 17 percent from racial minorities and the 23 percent in the poverty bracket have a more positive academic and social experience than comparable students in other communities. If they do not — if they still feel like outsiders, or if they are tracked into dead-end courses — they will lend credence to the arguments of historians like Colin Greer, who contends that, contrary to popular belief, the public schools have not helped poor children, "but instead [have] failed them in large numbers and forced them out of school."[5]

The difference between the rhetoric of a school's intentions and the reality of its results may serve to give students "proof" that a program is so much window dressing, concealing business-as-usual.

Advocates of the values clarification approach of Sidney Simon and of the cognitive moral development scheme of Lawrence Kohlberg object to the indoctrination of youth with narrow versions of traditional morality. They also call attention to the ways society in general and the schools in particular shape the conduct of the young, and convey values that are unacknowledged and often in sharp contradiction to the stated aims of education. They seriously question the traditional pattern of school authority, order, conformist behavior, routine of instruction, and preoccupation with "right" answers as hindering open-minded inquiry and reflection about different points of view, ideals, and beliefs. They want neutral and non-judgmental teachers who will not use their power to foreclose prematurely consideration of views contrary to their own or their understanding of vaguely defined majority views.

It does not follow, however, that schools are to neglect value orientation. As Kohlberg puts it, "Public instruction is committed to maintenance of the rights of individuals and to the transmission of the values of respect for individual rights. This respect should include respect for the right to hold moral beliefs differing from those of the majority. It need not include respect for moral beliefs predicated on the denial of

the rights of others, whether of the majority or of a minority."[6] Both Kohlberg and Simon see the teacher's task as one of helping students become aware of values that already influence the choices they make, and of the many competing and contradictory values in the society around them. The emphasis is on openness and on tolerance of others, because awareness gives people freedom to reflect, evaluate, and change.

In acquainting students with the process of making moral decisions, proponents of formal values instruction use simulation games, role-playing, and dilemmas that might arise in our changing world. The intent is to make students see that serious moral choices are seldom between clear good and obvious evil, but between conflicting goods — between justice, freedom, equality, and order, for example, each of which has a claim on conscience but all of which together make it hard to know what to emphasize in a concrete situation. Such exercises may help young people strike a balance between constructive planning and individual freedom, for example, or decide how much individual freedom to sacrifice in the interest of classroom order. Not only may students discover the difficulty of knowing whose freedom has priority, but they may also realize that people can differ on how the balance should be struck, and still be acting on the same principles. As they become aware of the ramifications of their own moral choices, they may become a bit more charitable toward those who take other options.

The humility that follows upon such recognition would be a welcome quality in adults who work with students and young children. It is unfortunate that advocates of the neutral and non-judgmental attitude like Sidney Simon allow themselves to say that traditional values "have become meaningless platitudes or hypocritical meanderings." Of course there is mindless moralizing, self-righteousness, and self-serving activity hiding under the guise of idealism, and too often the spirit of the tradition is buried under the letter. But this writer would prefer to unmask hypocrisies and expose the triviality of moral preachments than risk implying to students that such corruptions are, in fact, the tradition.

One major contribution to better handling of moral questions with the young is Kohlberg's research on the stages of moral development and the levels of judgment young people are capable of understanding at each stage. If teachers were more familiar with these stages, they would save themselves useless argumentation with youngsters who are unable to follow their reasoning, and they might actually stimulate a young person's moral growth by responding more appropriately when the child's behavior is unacceptable. Unfortunately, boys and girls do not wear their developmental stages on their sleeves, and teachers face rooms full of pupils whose developments are not all neatly at the same stage.

School Life: Contradictions and Cross-purposes

Just as the experiment in Salt Lake City schools appears to founder on the shoals of high school, the Kohlberg and Simon approaches are likely to miss the mark, because there is, in truth, a "hidden curriculum" that successfully indoctrinates most students by the time they reach high school. Any plan or proposal for moral development in school has to be weighed against a reasonably fresh awareness of the peculiar ambience of school life, with its contradictions and cross-purposes.

The racial, religious, ethnic, sexist, and economic stereotyping of the adult world are woven into the fabric of every child's daily fare in the classroom, the corridor, the playground, and the school bus. Adolescents arrive in high school bringing attitudes and prejudices they have acquired at home and in the neighborhood, ready to take their places in this group or that clique. Understandings are mysteriously perpetuated about what courses and activities some students never join unless they happen to be pretty self-assured, free spirits. The visible and invisible turfs appear, winners and losers begin to get the message, and their respective parents heave sighs of relief or join the crowd of inveterate schoolhaters.

How, under the circumstances, can a school teach young people to respect each other, and strive for the "liberty and justice for all" they avow every day in their pledge of allegiance? Somewhere in the back of American minds the melting pot myth persists in suggesting that all sorts and conditions of youth enter the system at one end, and come out the other just plain American, having crossed the lines of class, color, and creed.

To the extent that the myth holds true, it may be that some children beat the system. For unless those who live and work in the nation's affluent communities address in some serious fashion the culture of poverty and the history of oppression, it is senseless to expect the schools alone to teach young people to be concerned with the needs of others, with liberty and justice for all. In school, children of affluence learn little of the experience of those millions Michael Harrington calls "the other Americans"[7] — unskilled workers, migrant farm workers, the aged, and minorities who do not share the wealth of the richest country on earth. Their history is seldom told, their literature little read. The values and aspirations associated with the common heritage the young read and hear so much about in school are a mockery in the culture of poverty, and have a hollow ring in its twin culture of affluence.

It is precisely such hollowness that echoes in the bloodless simulation exercises about who gets thrown out of the life boat or whether it's right to steal a loaf of bread to save one's starving grandmother. Particularly if the discussion occurs in an elective course few students take. Particularly if the teacher's neutrality permits the issue of the priority of property over person to be drawn dispassionately by adoles ents. Particu-

larly if students do not understand that they are surrounded by starving grandmothers, adrift with them on "Spaceship Earth."

In this country, we believe in free speech, and since the beginning of our national existence we have by law agreed to disagree. We have long recognized that if our disagreements are to enhance the quality of our lives, we must have an informed citizenry, and to that end we are committed to public education. Yet those who fear books that acknowledge shortcomings in American institutions and achievement can, and do, succeed in having such books branded as un-American and banned from schools in their communities.

Principals, classroom teachers, and guidance counselors encourage students to take advantage of as many curricular and extracurricular opportunities as they can, and people outside the schools have difficulty comprehending why students don't take better advantage of those opportunities. My impression is that young people commonly feel that school is like a horse race — a processing mechanism that prepares the few to enter the winners' circle and the many to clean stables. And they operate on this belief, not for the sake of principle, but for survival.

Why is it that students approach their classrooms and teachers with their guards up and their real thoughts securely hidden? Often what a teacher takes to be a good discussion is a form of gamesmanship on the part of students, calculated to impress the teacher and ensure good grades. It is sad but true that the classroom inhibits the kind of inquiry that seeks to enter "personal space." After an entire semester's course in philosophy and ethics I offered to high school students, a number of them prevailed on me to continue informally, on a "non-class" basis, for the rest of the year. So many new issues emerged that should have come up during the first semester that I was compelled to ask, "How come?" My students responded with surprise bordering on condescension: "You didn't expect us to say what we really thought in a class, did you?"

It may be that boys and girls in school are hurt so often that they become wary of exposing their real feelings, afraid to disagree or ask what they need to know lest they be put down as stupid or naive. It takes self-confidence and trust to be frank and open with a person who has the power to do one harm. Teachers, themselves wary in their relationships with administrators, easily dismiss the similar power differential that exists between teacher and student. If trustworthiness, honesty, and forthrightness are values to be nurtured in young people, surely these are matters to which schools need to attend.

Students pay attention to schoolwork they know is going to be "on the test." If they cheat and manipulate their way through the system, it is because they are concerned more with what works than with what is right, or true, or good. In highly competitive schools, conversation among Ivy League college aspirants is seldom about Princeton's history department or Yale's English program. It is about prestige, about doors

that will open. It is about access. Adults conspire in the mockery of education with advice about what will "look good on the transcript," by emphasizing grades and test scores, by the implied and sometimes explicit admonition that those who don't go to college are second-class citizens. Schools put a premium on getting the right credentials, and teachers inflate grades because they don't want to "spoil the kids' chances."

Such, in my view, are some of the conditions that pose fundamental moral issues for the schools. Every school reflects the community of which it is a part and shares in the community's ambivalence and contradictory intentions. That reality is not going to change much unless people in and out of school take collective action to make it change. None of this is to say that all proposals for moral education in the schools are wrong and have no merit. It is only to warn that they may all be a waste of time and effort if everything else remains the same. For if the nurturing, training, and education of the young are not in some sense everyone's job, it gradually becomes no one's.

II. Meeting the Responsibility Teachers Can't Avoid

Even if nurturing, training, and education are everyone's job, schoolteachers still have a large part of the responsibility for the moral development of the young, if only because children and adolescents spend so much time under their tuition or supervision. It should be equally obvious that whether or not they acknowledge the responsibility, their influence on the moral development of the young is direct and continual. The question, then, is not whether teachers should take responsibility, but how they can best meet a responsibility they cannot avoid.

Though it is risky to speculate on the motives of others, it is probably safe to say that most men and women who enter teaching do so with at least some idea of training the successor generation to bring this country a bit closer to the goal of a free and humane society. To release others from ignorance, to increase their knowledge as a way of giving them greater control of their future, is not only what good teachers do for their students but also an expression of their own values and the values of the profession. Today, in the face of conditions that are often disappointing or discouraging and sometimes downright dangerous, many continue to use their ingenuity, imagination, and energy to render that service to every student who enters their classrooms.

It is this writer's contention that teachers ought continually to be finding ways to help students face the moral implications of the subjects they teach, and help them understand that knowledge is a form of power that entails stewardship. This does not mean that teachers have a right to impose their own views on students and require agreement, nor

that all subjects lend themselves readily to moral discourse. But to the degree that teachers deal with values in the regular curriculum rather than in discrete courses of "values clarification" or "moral education," they reinforce the entire process by which young people think about the meaning and purpose of their actions and decisions.

Here are ideas for seizing opportunities the regular curriculum offers teachers to meet their responsibility for moral development. They do not constitute a "program" in any sense; they are intended only to be suggestive, and to make teachers, school officials, and parents aware of the opportunities available in the ordinary daily work of most schools.

In Mathematics

A mathematics teacher might encourage students to think of the ways data are gathered and organized. The use of statistics combined with scientific polling and the mass media raises difficult moral questions that a math teacher should at least be able to point out to a class. As more and more schools train young people to use computers, are they also taking the time to talk about the moral implications of the information-gathering capacities of these machines and the uses to which that information is put? The control over the lives of others, the invasion of privacy, the potential for disastrous accidents are only some of the issues that need to be faced. As computerized robots displace people in industrial jobs, is there a plan to find jobs for those who are put out of work? Is a programmer who enables a repressive government to track down dissidents by means of a computer in any way accountable for what happens to them? Or is he merely part of the system leased by that government? How do the networks with their computer projections of winners on voting day affect our political process? Who decides such matters?

On a more mundane level, children need to learn again what numbers mean when they go beyond simple calculations that correspond in some measure with daily experience into the world of millions, billions, light years, and megatons. When math teachers make up word problems, why not use significant matters? The MX missile system is apparently going to cost $35 billion to construct. For the same amount of money, how many universities could be set up, each with an endowment of $25 million? How many fully staffed hospitals at $45 million each? How many homes could be insulated at $3,000 each? If a supertanker contains 65 million gallons of oil that is transferred to 55-gallon drums 2 feet in diameter, and those drums are placed side by side along the shore, how far along the coast will the line of drums go? The answer conveys to even the slowest student the extent of such an oil spill even when the teacher says nothing. Let the implications of a population explosion be understood through a geometric progression — i.e., fruit flies breeding in a closed container. The next-to-last time they breed, the container is only half full.

In countless ways, students could absorb important factual data while doing math; data having to do with consumption of resources, distribution of food, or the probabilities of nuclear war. The numbers and percentages appear daily in the media. Children need to understand how to process that information.

In Science

Science teachers might make students aware of the values that determine the way science is done — its openness to new formulations of reality, its respect for scholarship that transcends political and national boundaries, and the rigorous testing of theories before they are accepted. Beyond the values involved in doing science, teachers might consider the range of value judgments that determine what research should be pursued, what methods of research are permissible, what responsibility scientists bear for the use made of their findings. What obligation, if any, do they have for alerting the rest of society to the implications of their research and the technology derived from it?

As more sophisticated ways develop to interfere with and modify the life process, who will decide how, when, or whether to use such newfound powers? Should scientists shape the course of human evolution by genetic control, for example? Or should they let it proceed without plan, even if malnutrition corrupts the gene pool of the third world? How do scientists assess the dangers of various kinds of industrial waste to the life support systems of the earth? Many universities are now struggling with choices as difficult as those the scientists face in their laboratories. Are they free to pursue any and all research without reference to the community of which they are a part? May universities derive income from the products of that research? Does the source of the funding determine what research is to be done, or does the individual scientist?

To examine such real moral issues in the context of the subject that raises them is to prepare students to ask the right kinds of questions as they become voting citizens. At least they will have to reflect on how our moral accountability extends into the actions of institutions and agencies with which we are associated.

In English

English teachers have a wealth of material that provides models of human conduct, writing about conduct good and bad, and reflection on how people change as they gain insight, or suffer, or discover how their behavior affects the lives of others. Father Zossima in *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*, and the moral suffering in *King Lear* can have a powerful influence on a student's sense of human wisdom and virtue. Swift's *Gullivers Travels* or his *Modest Proposal* offers a chance to see a writer using his pen to attack the foolishness and the evils he sees in the world. *A Man for All Seasons*

and *Huckleberry Finn*, each in its own way, shows individuals forced to choose between their own integrity and the pressures of the society about them.

English teachers can do other, less obvious things to enhance the moral sensibilities of their students. They can consciously help fashion bridges of understanding between people by including as a matter of course the works of black writers like Maya Angelou, Don Lee, or Sonia Sanchez, Georgia Johnson, Richard Wright, William Kelly, or Ralph Ellison — not because they are black writers, but because they are good writers. The Norse Gods and the well-populated pantheon of the Greeks have always found a place in English class; students might be made similarly aware of the religious beliefs of the first Americans, read about the Hopi way, or learn of the messianic dream of the Sioux recounted in *Black Elk Speaks*.

Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*, Gold's short story *The Heart of the Artichoke*, Day's *Life with Father*, and Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* provide a teacher with a variety of illustrations of the diversity of people's backgrounds as well as their common humanity, the range of choices open to them, or the constraints upon them. They also demonstrate how within that diversity the values of loyalty and love, friendship and respect, courage and compassion, gaiety and laughter are embodied and made real. Such vicarious exposure is second only to real life itself in shaping young people's values and giving them a more inclusive conscience. Movies like *Sounder*, *Twelve Angry Men*, or *The Caine Mutiny* show people trying to maintain their human dignity and make tough moral choices in complex and stressful situations, revealing in the process how they are conditioned by their past but still free to take responsibility for their present decisions.

In History and Social Studies

History teachers might fill some of the gaps and omissions in the customary accounts of our past. They need to remind themselves, as well as their students, that what is chosen to be studied reflects a point of view that screens out more than it admits. The emergence of courses in black history and the feminist movement is an attempt to offset the inadequacy and bias of "official versions" of history. Lincoln began his Gettysburg Address by referring to "our fathers" who brought forth a new nation "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created free and equal." Yet textbooks in American History give the impression that the only people dedicated to that proposition were white and male. Teachers can do something to achieve a degree of balance through the themes they choose to emphasize, the movies they show, the people they select for study so that all their students may speak proudly of "our forebears" and "our history."

They can help students acquire a useful and intelligible past, one that enables them both to comprehend the present moment and to see ways to act in it and on it. They can encourage their students to recognize that a study of the past and of the present is crucial to their freedom, for they cannot be free if they do not understand both the limitations and the opportunities of their circumstances, or understand how those circumstances came to be what they are. Young people are quite aware of the winner-loser syndrome but commonly think of it in idiosyncratic rather than structural terms. They are no less willing than their elders to blame the victim. Here is where a teacher can help.

For example, one might make a fairly convincing case that the automobile has had as much to do with the current inequities in public education as any other single factor. Henry Ford made what had been a plaything of the rich available to the average man. While some people saw the automobile as an environmental blessing arriving just in time to save the cities from being buried in horse manure, most saw it as a vehicle for good times — the Sunday drive, visiting folks in the next county, and as roads improved, moving a bit farther out of town.

Who can say precisely when a pattern hardened, allowing the middle class to take their tax monies, leave their city workplaces, and support suburban school systems that now ring the cities in ever-widening circles? Businesses large and small have abandoned the city for the shopping mall, often beyond the reach of public transportation, blacktopping pastures or leveling green woods, assured that car owners will find them. Freeways slash through the urban neighborhoods of the powerless or swallow up homesteads and family farms, enabling some people to reap the benefits and cultural delights of the city without having to assume responsibility for its massive problems. One of the massive problems has been the disintegration — in more than one sense of the word — of the public schools.

And so the lines between winners and losers in individual schools are drawn more intractably between city and suburb; and instead of joining forces as logical allies in a common effort to wrest benefits from an indifferent power structure, the poor and the excluded are left fighting each other over inadequate schools. When their anger turns to violence, political leaders take emergency measures and promise reforms, while the rest of society, momentarily upset and concerned, busies itself "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic," to borrow Dean Hersh's phrase.* Nothing changes much, and the same human trap is maintained.

Other cases might be made for the inequities in education, and teachers can "make cases" for class discussion of other problems. Such

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* Richard H. Hersh is dean of the graduate school at the University of Oregon. The quotation is taken from "Help! Teacher Can't Teach!" in *Time*, June 16, 1980.

exercises help students grasp the social forces that build and maintain traps for one group while expanding opportunities for others. Not a little American history is about groups that have sprung such traps in the face of overwhelming odds. Their stories, together with information about the law, people's rights, methods of organization, the nature and use of political power are proper "content" in history and social studies, and knowledge of it can dull the cynicism of students who tend to believe there is no beating the system.

In the Arts

It is ironic that the arts, often perceived as "frills" in education and most often cut from the budget during hard times, are one of the best vehicles for the transmission of values. Although many do not regard the arts as "basic," we know that man made music and drew pictures long before he learned to write or do sums. Through the centuries, it has been the artist who gives people eyes to see and ears to hear that which raises their spirits as well as their consciousness. Even at the simplest level, there is great value in giving children the profoundly human experience of creating a version of the world around them, imposing their own developing sense of order upon it, free of adult perspective and scale.

Every art form practiced in schools — art, band, orchestra, chorus, drama, and dance — contains a perfect object lesson in the reconciliation of discipline with freedom. As students attempt to create or interpret something, they find that they must acquire the habits of self-discipline, dedication to the perfection of technique, faithful practice, persistence over time, and respect for tools and materials. Without those qualities and habits, they find that their most cherished inspirations fall short of their own standards.

Students of the arts also learn that the demanding side of the arts is not enough. In order to create an original and communicative work of art, they must be in touch with themselves and with the longing and aspirations of the world around them. They must develop their power to see, to listen, and to empathize. They must learn to open themselves to the art forms of other cultures and other centuries.

Teachers can nurture both the impulse to freedom and the need for discipline by encouraging students along both directions, and helping students to see that imagination and hard work are inextricably intertwined. Teachers can help students understand that artists and playwrights are concerned not only with beauty, but with truth, even when the truth is ugly or depressing, as it is in the drawings of George Gross, Picasso's "Guernica," or in the photographs of dust bowl victims in the 1930's.

The arts also play a powerful role in bringing people together. Music can stir common loyalties and express communal values. National anthems, great choral music, spirituals, and hymns play an important role

in unifying people from diverse racial and class backgrounds. When Arthur Fiedler conducted "The Stars and Stripes Forever" on the 4th of July, he demonstrated the unifying power of spirited interpretation, even of a song that has become somewhat threadbare through endless repetition. Music has been and continues to be an inspiration for social change, as the protest songs of Woody Guthrie, Joan Baez, or the civil rights song "We Shall Overcome" attest. Anyone connected with schools knows there is nothing like a musical production, a marching band, or a rock concert to bring all sorts and conditions of men, women, girls, boys, rich, poor, black, and white together.

Even for those students who do not choose to practice any particular art form in high school, or in those schools too impoverished to offer studio courses taught by specialists, there are still opportunities for transmitting society's most profound moral and ethical ideas. Teachers of English, history, and foreign languages have natural opportunities to show their students the connections between civilization and the arts. As they teach the history and literature of Greece, Rome, the Middle Ages, or modern industrial society, students can be brought to an appreciation of the moral and ethical visions of many kinds of societies throughout the ages.

For example, nearly every American school child is exposed to a unit on Greece. Golden Age sculpture and architecture provide a chance to teach the ancient Greek's moral vision of balance and proportion — a vision lacking in our own civilization, while at the same time teaching that the monumental products of the Golden Age were dependent upon slave labor and forms of injustice that would never be tolerated in our own time. By contrast, nearly every American school child has an understanding of jazz and the long tradition of popular music derived from jazz. A study of American jazz, also the product of a slave society, would be instructive as a contrast to classical Greece. Students would learn that art does not always arise from the powerful and wealthy elements of society, but sometimes from the oppressed. The universal appeal of jazz bears witness to the fact that art can erupt in any quarter and compel the sympathetic response of peoples who are culturally different from the creators.

Obviously teachers have to attend to the principal task of teaching their subject matter as set forth in the school district's curriculum; the suggestion here is simply that every subject matter contains opportunities to address the moral dimension as well. By the materials they select and the issues they raise, teachers can enhance their students' willingness to care for themselves, for others, and for the task of learning. This is no mean task; but when teachers achieve this kind of relationship — and perhaps only when they do — then behavior that may truly be called moral is likely to follow. Respect, mutuality, and genuine interest in the needs of others are the hallmark.

III. Responsibility Beyond the Classroom

With teachers who come to grips with the moral implications of their subjects, no student will be entirely abandoned to that world devoid of adults described in the report of the White House Conference (see page 2). Yet teachers in their classrooms, however competent and conscientious, cannot compensate for the isolation of children from the rest of society. Theirs has to be a shared responsibility, as William Bennett makes clear:

> Free, responsible people do not emerge naturally or by accident. Rather, such people are the result of the intentions and efforts of parents, teachers, communities, and society at large.

The isolation of children is a relatively new phenomenon in American culture, and there is still no tradition of wisdom to which adults can appeal for guidance in the face of the problems it generates. Their tendency is to ignore what is happening to young people in school until there is a crisis; and to conditions like massive illiteracy, racial violence, or drug abuse they often react in ways that make matters worse.

Drug Abuse: A Case in Point

The controversy over drug abuse is a case in point. When the problem appeared in the suburbs, adults were on the outside looking in on the strange world of their children. For the most part, they were oblivious of what had been going on; and even when they began to find out, they had no useful information about drugs to share.

As people pressed the police and the schools to do something, the young were bombarded with horror stories and threats, suspended from school, and jailed. All that did little to stop them from using drugs, but much to generate attitudes fully as dangerous as the drugs. The young concluded that adults didn't know what they were talking about, and even those who did lost their credibility. Most parents were totally surprised to find that the drug experience of many youngsters began in the family medicine cabinet, rather than with some sinister pusher on the street. In assemblies and talk shows, parents and school people found themselves unable to give a satisfactory answer to why smoking pot was a criminal offense while drinking liquor was not, though by all counts alcoholism is one of the most serious drug problems in our society.

It was young adults of college age who proved most helpful. They were close enough to high school themselves to know how teenagers felt. They could talk the same language and offer counsel that was heard. They understood the power of peer pressure and the need for peer approval. Above all, they knew the importance of sharing accurate, honest information about drugs and about the law. They knew that most youngsters will take some risks that scare their parents half to death, but

that with a little help from their friends most will avoid serious trouble. They were also much more sensible of who was in real trouble and why. They had lived in that separate world where for some the only "success" was experiencing an acid trip or driving home from a party stoned and waking up the next day to tell of it. What attention and caring they received was from their peers, who gave them shelter when they couldn't make it home.

The imperious "Do as I say, not as I do" has never been a very productive strategy in the moral leadership or instruction of the young unless — and this is an overwhelmingly important qualification — it is preceded by confession and spoken with love. Then it can be heard because the speaker stands with, not above, the one addressed. When adults make their own pain, and their own human frailty and foolishness, available to young people, genuine learning and growth are possible, not just a test of wills. When adults ask or tell young people to do this or that, they should be able and willing to answer the "Why?" with something better than "Because I say so" or "Because I am the principal." Not, to be sure, in the hallway while things are out of hand, but in a setting where young people may understand how the do's and don'ts are grounded in a coherent and meaningful version of the school's ethos, and see its connection to the community and ultimately to the nation and the world. Many schools and communities are in disarray because there is no commonly understood or agreed-upon version of things, or because there are such grave contradictions that the only answer to "Why?" is to acknowledge the disparity and begin to change.

The Love Project

School administrators and teachers can turn controversies and crises to educational advantage. They can bring perspective by establishing a context to defuse some of the emotion, and reasserting values that allow people to work through their differences or at least find accommodation.

Arleen Lorrance was a teacher at the Thomas Jefferson High School in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn. Once a school with the enrollment of a successful, white, lower-middle class population, Thomas Jefferson had become 99 percent black and brown, while 85 percent of the faculty remained white. Lorrance describes it as "a turbulent, violent, big-city high school," where firemen quelled riots with hoses. Her book, *The Love Project*,[8] is the story of "how an angry person made a choice to be loving instead, and how that choice affected the lives of others simply through mirroring for them an alternative."

Lorrance enlisted adults and youngsters to improve an intolerable situation. Assuming the best in people rather than the worst, they approached the hostile and the skeptical — first, in the school, and then beyond its doors — appealing for cooperation, and they turned the whole situation around. The neighborhood became a community again;

the school became a learning environment again. One of the activities was a book fair, and the firemen helped to collect books: "It was beautiful," Lorrance says, "to see firemen, in full regalia, carrying armloads of books into the building instead of hoses."[9]

This was neither a packaged curriculum nor a program mandated by school board or district administration. It was a matter of getting back to basic human values, and to the valuing of people by and for each other, young and old together, without which nothing of consequence will happen in classrooms.

The rarity of such experiences calls attention to the high price society pays for age group segregation. Maybe the intemperance and shrillness of social discourse might be modified if the "Now" generation could learn about the pace of historical change from the "Then" generation — those segregated elders, still alive and alert, who grew up in a time before automobiles, radio, or television, before computers and space travel. When they are tucked away in Leisure Villages or holed up in solitary rooms, both young and old are deprived of a mutually enriching experience. Just as the young are done terrible and irrevocable harm when they are made to feel neither wanted nor needed, so too are the old. In either case, there is a narrowing of vision and a hardening of hearts.

Foxfire

Schools that have had the wisdom to bring older people into meaningful and useful contact with students have seen positive results with enthusiasm on both sides, and almost any school can have the same benefit with little expenditure of money or training of staff. All that is needed is the common sense to recognize the need and the willpower to start.

A noteworthy and marvelously successful example is Eliot Wigginton's accomplishment at the Rabun Gap Nacoochee School in the Appalachian Mountains. Wigginton was teaching English to pupils who were bored out of their minds by his conventional regimen. Tempted at first to play the familiar power game by asserting his authority, he began instead what is now widely known as "Foxfire." He put his charges in touch with elderly mountain people, who told their tales and revealed their crafts to fascinated and totally involved young interviewers. In time he was able to write confidently about "students who were going off to college knowing that they can *act* responsibly and effectively rather than being always *acted upon*."[10]

Others have borrowed his strategy and used it in urban settings with good results. Many cities also have programs that are designed to bring different groups of young people together, in and out of school, to learn about each other and from each other. These activities help build understanding among those who participate, and give young people opportunities to apply and test the values they are developing in school. Most

important, perhaps, activities that bring students into cooperative association with adults help young people learn that they can turn things around, that they can make things better, that they do make a difference. All such benefits are part of moral education. It is unfortunate that school schedules are often so inflexible that students and teachers alike give the activities up, rather than become entangled in red tape and the conflicting demands of school organization.

IV. Morality and the Schools

In any somber analysis of the failings of our institutions and the inadequacies of those within them, there is always the temptation to despair, to give up on what is already in place, and devote one's energies to utopian solutions of one sort or another. That strategy offers little help or consolation to those perplexed souls who will show up in the same classrooms tomorrow and every day for the foreseeable future. Nor do such radical proposals ordinarily engage those outside the schools.

The schools are probably in no more precarious a state than society's religious and service institutions, or its political and economic institutions. Nor is any of these institutions free of charlatans, time-servers, and people who act in bad faith, deluding themselves into believing they have no option but to continue doing as they have been doing. Evolution rather than revolution tends to be society's style of changing.

But that style may not endure if millions of graduates believe they are educated when in fact many are turned loose on the world as functional illiterates, and many more with meager knowledge and only marginal competence. The current kind of diploma-granting is a bureaucratic cover for our collective failure to respond to the needs of children with diverse abilities and widely differing circumstances; in this writer's opinion, it is cruel and immoral no matter how it may be rationalized. Not until Americans act as if they believe all children are equally valuable as persons, whatever their circumstances or abilities, and find ways to express that conviction to them symbolically and practically, will the schools be able to convey to them the moral values that are both implicit and explicit in traditional professions of faith like the pledge of allegiance.

Part of the difficulty stems from what Adlai Stevenson called the revolution of rising expectations. Once people begin to believe that their misfortune, poverty, or low status is not in their stars or in the divine order of things, but that it derives partly from themselves and partly from the contrivance of others, they will want change faster than either institutions or those in power are prepared to change. Impatience with injustice is radically different from giving in to the system or simply giving up. Imagination is stimulated; alliances are formed and tactics devised; and the art of the possible is entertained. A victory on any front

won through existing mechanisms generates new confidence that the system can be made to work. The civil rights movement, Nader's Raiders, Common Cause, and class action suits attest to the fundamental strength and vitality of our system.

Real education occurs informally in these ventures. Different people learn about each other, learn how to listen and communicate, discover which strongly held assumptions are wrong, find friends where enemies were expected and enemies where they expected friends. This is true of the best innovations in formal education. The process that allows people to take a new look at each other and at their common situation is a kind of magnetic field that elicits naturally a clarifying of values, a sorting out of goals, and a striking of balances that is the essence of critical thinking and moral action.

Some of the teaching and administration in the nation's school systems is outrageously bad, and the behavior of many, many youngsters makes adults roll their eyes heavenward in frustration or clench their teeth in fury. But nearly every school also has teachers and administrators who, almost in spite of the system, give their students the experience of true learning, and at least an inkling that the marriage of a critical mind and compassionate heart is profoundly humanizing as well as liberating. There is some consolation, too, in the fact that even poor teachers cannot always prevent a passage in Shakespeare, Melville, or Miller from stiking sparks of wisdom and truth, and starting a small fire in a student even though he may still fail the quiz and flunk the course. Great literature and other products of the creative mind have ways of sticking to people, and they enable young people to escape their narrow world.

Ideas have consequences that are unpredictable. Educators who taught the young to develop questioning minds in order to serve the needs of an expanding and ever-changing society were sometimes outraged when those questions were directed at the very system that supported the educators. Those who dismantled old certainties and made idols of the new technology were dismayed by the flower children who wanted no part of it, or by the young men who chose to risk jail or leave family and country rather than participate in a war they took to be illegal and immoral. They did not know what to make of the young blacks who first braved the brunt of white hostility to desegregate a schoolhouse, a lunch counter, or a bus — not in the name of some alien ideology but in response to the deepest promptings of their heritage.

In many ways, it has been young people who have prodded society into taking a fresh look at evils, injustices, and absurdities which their elders had accepted or lacked the will to confront. At times, they prod with simple acts of kindness, involving little or no sacrifice. At other times, their actions involve the risk of security, even the risk of their lives. The fact remains that at a time when immorality or amorality seems to characterize an entire generation of young people, countless

individuals among them in every sector of society are making commitments that can only be recognized and admired as moral.

When people sustain such commitments over the long haul, they discover who they are and what they are about. What youth need to be taught is that this kind of commitment is part of the American experience, with roots that go deep into history. Just as an amnesiac doesn't know who he is or where he is going, so a society that does not know its history can neither understand its present nor move coherently into its future. Every community gets its moral bearings from a constellation of memories, symbols, significant events, heroes, and stories that are carried in people's heads and conveyed from one generation to another in language, art, and music as well as in the way people order their lives and relate to one another. Time and circumstance bring some themes of the story to the fore while others recede, but as long as it is recited, individuals will be compelled by and charged with the question: "What does this story have to do with us in this time, in this place?"

We keep wanting to clean the story up, to erase the betrayals, the corruptions, the brutal inhumanities; but our novelists, our folk and blues singers, journalists, comedians, and sometimes our moviemakers keep us honest, prevent us from romanticizing and sentimentalizing what has been and continues to be a remarkable human enterprise. We have every reason to be proud of the tenacity with which Americans have tried to bring that original vision of a self-governing people to fruition, and of the persistence with which some continue to prod the consciences of others.

We don't need to invent courses in moral education to teach these values. They are implicit in teaching the subjects that comprise good basic education—history, language and literature, science and mathematics, the arts—when those subjects are taught competently, with courage and imagination. And the learning of children and adolescents can be enhanced if schools make place for activities that bring young people into close and useful association with adults.

To teach these subjects with understanding, deep seriousness, and passion is a profoundly moral act. When they are offered respectfully and appropriately to young people, young people will respond. To be moral is, after all, to be responsible; and responsibility is not a clutter of words and rules, but a discipline of the mind and heart.

NOTES

1. William J. Bennett, "Simple Truths," *Newsweek*, January 7, 1980, p. 7 .
2. *Report of the White House Conference on Children to the President of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1971), p. 252.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 241-243.
4. M. Donald Thomas and Rafael Lewy, "Education and Moral Conduct: Rediscovering America," *Character*, January 1980.
5. Herbert J. Gans, foreword in Colin Greer, *The Great School Legend* (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. vii.
6. Theodore R. Sizer, ed., *Religion and Public Education* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967), p. 166.
7. Michael Harrington, *The Other Americans* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).
8. Arleen Lorrance, The Love Project (San Diego, Calif.: LP Publications, 1972), preface.
9. *Ibid.*, cover page.
10. Eliot Wigginton, *The Foxfire Book* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1972), p. 12. (A number of subsequent *Foxfire* volumes were published after the original book appeared in 1972.)

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